

From Your Servant Leader

October 8, 2015

America appears to be slowly waking up to a national issue of mental illness. Recent acts of mass violence have the media questioning the root causes of extraordinarily tragic acts. “What drove him to this?” and “How could this happen if he were normal?” are used as explanations, or excuses, to explain such unexplainable behavior.

According to the National Association of Mental Health (NAMI), one in every 5 adults will have a mental health issue annually. One in every 20 adults has a severe mental illness. These illnesses are conditions that include schizophrenia, depression, eating disorders, ADHD, Autism, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and others, some still not completely understood. To be clear, mental illness is not the same as genetic mental disabilities such as Down’s Syndrome.

As Vincentians, we may more frequently encounter someone who has a mental illness. We help a homeless person with PTSD issues who can’t find a place to stay. We visit a family member with severe anxiety disorder or depression who finds it difficult to leave the home. We wonder how many of those we help have an undiagnosed disorder that either caused, or exacerbates, the person’s ability to earn a living or make good choices for themselves or their families.

Within our work to understand the root causes of poverty toward systemic change solutions, we simply can’t ignore mental health. Perhaps mental health issues underlie what we believe are the root causes of poverty, but the family and their medical resources didn’t accurately identify it. If we suggest through our mentoring some choices that will help elevate someone out of poverty, the underlying health issues may make this even more difficult.

We also need to face the challenge of providing home visits when we can’t be certain of a person’s mental health. The founders’ wisdom to require that Vincentians always visit in pairs helps to provide comfort for both the visitor and the visited. We should not be quick to provide an unqualified opinion of the mental health of those we visit, because sometimes an urgent situation of need and anxiety is just that, temporary, and that’s what we see.

If we were to visit someone with a physical need such as diabetes, high blood pressure or back problems that kept them from gainful employment, the answers would be clear – help them seek professional medical guidance, appropriate medicines and treatment, and a support system to insure compliance and improvement. Well, the same applies for someone with a mental illness. However, the person in need isn’t wearing a “Help me, I’m bipolar” sign or show other obvious signs of need. Neither are we in the position to diagnose a mental condition.

The partial answer that helps both the Vincentian and the person in need is education. The more we understand about the signs of various metal illnesses, the more we are in a position to recommend, in a thoughtful, charitable manner, that someone seek professional help. We have few qualms about



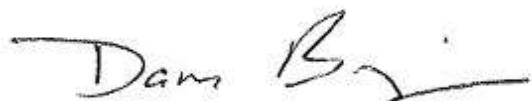
asking if someone has had a physical recently, right? Maybe we should ask if they have had any visits with mental health professionals as well. "Have you talked with someone recently?"

Why don't we ask this? Because of stigmas. We casually joke that someone is crazy, or that "I've always wondered about her..." We confuse intelligence with mental health. We unfairly fear that people with a mental illness are violent or unstable. And quietly, we wonder if we ourselves are "normal" when we get upset, can't control our emotions, binge eat or some days just don't want to get out of bed.

If one of every 20 people has a mental illness condition, then we can assume that someone in our lives, maybe someone quite close, is in that number. As Vincentians we can surely count on the fact that someone we seek to help needs wellness help, too. We can run away from this, I suppose, and simply stop helping others. But that's not who we are as Vincentians. We can learn and share with other Vincentians our experiences with mental illness. We can recognize signs and compassionately help our friends and neighbors in need who need a little help getting to professional resources. I know that if there is a way to ask someone to seek treatment, a Vincentian will learn how to do so with grace and understanding. Let's start these conversations.

Mental illness is not a blanket excuse for criminal acts, or for that matter homelessness or unemployment. But it is a factor for some and we can't ignore it. Mental illness isn't contagious, but it can be epidemic without adequate resources to identify and provide early treatment. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is a leader in providing so many forms of material assistance. We have steadily been helping more Americans in poverty get to doctors for their physical needs. What can we do together to lead as well in helping our friends get the mental and psychological help they need for productive living?

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dave Brin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with "Dave" on the left and "Brin" on the right, separated by a small space.

Dave